NEW BOOKS.

Six Admirable Essays.

With the exception of Mr. W. D. Howells and Mr. Henry James, we know of no American writer in whom soundness and fecundity of thought are so generally combined with felicity of expression as they are in Mr. W. C. Brownell, the author of "Victorian Prose Masters" (Scribners). In reading him we recognize that we are in the presence at once of an independent thinker and of a master in the art of communicating ideas. Here is a man, one feels, who is qualified for exposition, not only by wide observation of life and close study of books, but by a mind no less receptive and tenacious of impressions, however delicate and fleeting, than is the sensitized plate of a photographer. In his writings we not only catch the aroma of culture, but taste the more pungent savor of first-hand reflections on the complexities of human nature. As for his culture it is pervasive, not spectacular; not exhibited in elaborate parallels or far-fetched comparisons, like Macaulay's; but barely intimated by the choice of an epithet, a simile, an illusion. The very large part of knowledge which we must needs acquire from books seems in the case of Mr. Brownell to have undergone a process of appropriation unusually complete. It has not been merely ticketed and stowed away in convenient cells of the cerebrum: it seems rather to have been assimilated into the native substance of the brain; one might almost say that it has been distilled into the elixir of a personality. There is many a passage in the book before us which for condensation of knowledge and compactness of thought, coupled with fluidity of utterance, recalls the products of distillation. If we dwell a moment on this point, it is because nothing more charms a reader—he is seldom charmed in this way—than to see culture not displayed as a jewel, hard-won and held correspondingly precious by its owner, but worn lightly as a flower. It is of the very few who cast this spell upon us—a spell which has a moral, as well as an intellectual, source—that we say, "They write with *distinction*." There is a quality, however, even higher than distinction—goodness. It is borne in upon the reader of these essays that they could only have been written by a good man.

To give reasons for our opinion of Mr. Brownell's work is but too easy. We have only to extract here and there a sentence from his appreciations of Thackeray, George Eliot and George Meredith: the essays on Carlyle, Matthew Arnold and Ruskin should be reserved for another occasion. The paper on Thackeray is a proof that cordial, nay ardent, admiration need not exclude nice discrimination. For example, Mr. Brownell concedes that Thackeray "had no talent for abstract thinking, for abstruse philosophy." He had, however, a criticism of life, and it was a healthful, a consoling and inspiring one. All his novels are informed with it, and receive from it a kind of benediction. Mr. Brownell does ample justice to Thackeray's view of human life. "To assume," we read, "that he has no philosophy would be to ignore the significance of one of the most definite and complete syntheses of human phenomena that have ever been made, and a synthesis, moreover, incomparably buttressed by the acutest analysis and the most copious illustration." Mr. Brownell goes on to say that Thackeray's ideas "are moral ideas rather than metaphysical—the ideas for which Voltaire eulogized English poetry—and he deals with them powerfully, cogently, winningly, rather than refining upon them and following out their evolution as a disinterested exercise of the mind. They are the ideas, too, that inspire human motives and govern human action in familiar life and in the individual, that contribute to the making or the unmaking of character—his chief preoccupation—rather than to the development of the intelligence." Again: "There is no missing the tenor of his [Thackeray's] gospel, which is that character is the one thing of importance in life; that it is tremendously complex, and the easiest thing in the world to misconceive, both in ourselves and in others; that truth is the one instrument of its perfecting and the one subject worthy of pursuit; and that the study of truth discloses littlenesses and futilities in character at its best, for which the only cloak is charity and the only consolation and atonement the cultivation of the affections."

This, then, is the conclusion at which our author arrives: "If Thackeray had no head above his eyes, he had at least a heart below them, and the fact is a controlling influence in his philosophy. 'Sure, love *vincit omnia*,' exclaims Colonel Esmond in a familiar passage, and the principle is everywhere fundamental in Thackeray's 'realistic' scheme of things—not love between the sexes, necessarily, nor particularly in any of its manifestations, but love as the universal principle to which true salvation is inseparably attached. Humor is 'wit and love,' in his definition. Love is the inspiration of the 'awe' and 'reverence' and 'tenderness' he is constantly celebrating, of the humility and simplicity he incarnates in his winning characters, as the lack of it is the weakness of his reprehensible ones. * * His gospel is Voltaire's apotheosis of good sense plus heart. If his good sense is not as cheery and unfailing as Voltaire's, if fault and weakness were ever present with him, and, humanly speaking, the futility of all things impresses him more deeply than it does minds of perfect sanity, if there is a touch of melancholy in his mirth and the temperamental reaction follows the indulgence of his highest spirits, he regains his philosophic equilibrium always by instinctive reference to his just as clearly perceived principle of the love which, as he says, 'reigns supreme over all.'" Mr. Brownell adds that "it is open to any one to object to this philosophy as trite, but it is at least a philosophy and Thackeray's philosophic force and originality consists in his rediscovering it for himself, in his making it his own in virtue of his basing his adherence to it on his own experience and observation, in the sureness of his reliance upon it after an absolutely candid and wonderfully searching examination of the data of human life, and in the convincing eloquence with which his inductions therefrom bring its soundness and sweetness home to the thinking reader."

The writer of this essay gives of his abundance and leaves us perfectly convinced that he could give us much more if he chose. It seems ungrateful to say that we miss anything, yet we do wish that Mr. Brownell had said a word about Thackeray's indebtedness to Sterne. The magnitude of that indebtedness was ultimately acknowledged by Thackeray himself in one of the very last of the "Roundabout Papers." We refer to the paper called "At Dessein's." Recalling how harshly he had dealt with the author of "Tristram

Continued on Eighth Page